Aaron Packard

UNIV 391

Professor Schwartz

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Design Activism: Beautiful Strangeness for a Sustainable World *by: Alastair Faud-Luke*

Alastair Fuad-Luke is a Professor of Practice, Emerging Design Practices at the School of Arts, Design and Architecture, Aalto University, Helsinki, Finland. He is a design thinker, enabler, educator, writer and activist contributing to the international debate about how design can encourage transition towards ecologically and socially sustainable ways of living.

In his book, *Design Activism: Beautiful Strangeness for a Sustainable World*, Alastair explains the history, present and future of sustainable design in academia, industry and the fabric of our society. The author acknowledges a number of designers, engineers and thinkers who have paved paths of what ‘design activism’ looks like such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Alvar Aalto, Richard Buckminster Fuller and many others.

Alastair Fuad-Luke’s definition of ‘design activism’ is the practice or exploration in real-life situations and/or academics. ‘Practice’ context is that the outcomes are aimed at positive change in a real-life situation involving the wider culture and fabric of our society. Academic-oriented ‘design studies’ context is that the target is predominantly the design culture of academia. Fuad-Luke goes further in explaining activism and the five capitals framework: Natural, human, social, manufactured and financial. Natural and human are the two primary forms of capital. Social, manufactured and financial are derived from the two previous primary forms of capital. Through these forms of capital, we may see the motivations and intentions design activists will follow in order to reach certain goals for a more sustainable world. Design activists can be motivated by a lot of things: Morality, desires, goals, the greater good, etc. However, according to Alastair, the greatest motivational tool is external factors. He claims that activists take on the role of ‘change agents’ where they try to change actions of others. This may eventually turn in to ‘transformational activism’ where their activism undergoes a personal internal transformation as well as expressing it outwardly. After this long introduction to what design activism actually is, Alastair goes on to explain the phases that design has undergone throughout history and how it is changing today for the future.

One example of a new design language was ‘Pop Design’ which emerged with its central tenets of diverse expression, symbolism, ephemerality and fun; “This celebration of cultural pluralism recognized the ecology of the human condition, something Rationalism and Functionalism had ignored at its peril” (42). Ironically, while design is acknowledged as a powerful communicative force, it has failed to communicate its own social and environmental ambitions to society, and so remains perceived as merely a servant to powerful economic imperatives. Alastair quotes Rachel Cooper who begs the question: “Is design in a philosophical crisis”? Fuad-Luke suggests that perhaps sustainability offers the opportunity for design to find its real voice. Design activists may have to multi-task by focusing on saving society, the environment and the future of design.

Alastair sets high ecological goals for our economic enterprises that include 90% improvement in current efficiencies. Alastair mentions PricewaterhouseCoopers, a leading global financial consultancy, who think that sustainability is about creating new business value beyond the traditional view of assets, financial rewards, investors and customers. This involves a desire to include a wider range of stakeholders who will contribute to the creation of new values, including brand and intellectual value and also adding to human social and environmental value, and so helping to expand or restore these capitals.

Alastair Fuad-Luke’s book was less a novel and more a textbook. It contained a lot of specific examples, ideas, people, terms and philosophies that are geared towards a more sustainable world. Overall, I was very impressed with his knowledge and his passion for design and his ideas to create a more sustainably active society.